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ABSTRACT

The Reading-Spelling Vocabulary Program (RSVP) is a list of 900 words of highest frequency selected from 14 previous studies of words in print, spoken vocabulary, and children's and adults' handwriting. The words are divided into four levels and 60 lessons of 15 words each. When a sample test was constructed and administered to 266 elementary school students, the results showed that (1) the level of difficulty ranged from grade one to grade nine, (2) mastery of the RSVP test was not achieved until students had achieved a ninth grade reading ability, and (3) the 60 lessons were generally in ascending order of difficulty. (The word list is appended, arranged by level and lessons.) (RL)

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The RSVP: A Core Vocabulary for Students in Grades One To Nine

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Introduction

Of the 350,000 or more words in the English language, relatively few are used. In fact the literature suggests that the most frequently used 100 words, with their repetitions, account for more than 60 percent of the total running words used. The most frequently used 1,000 words account for 90 percent of the total running words used in writing, in speech, and in print. This small core of words is used nine times as often as all other words (Horn, 1924; Fitzsimmons and Loomer, 1978).

For years researchers have attempted to identify this common core. Thorndike (1921) completed one of the first major studies of our century by recording 1.5 million running words from which the 10,000 most frequently used were contained in his Teachers' Word Book. Of the dozens of word count studies since Thorndike, some have been original work, but many more have been compilations of previously established word studies.

Most of the research has been concerned with word frequency studies in printed materials. A few of these

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include Dolch's list of 220 basic sight words (1936), Gates' 1,811 words for primary students (1935), Kucera and Francis' 50,406 words of highest frequency (1967), and the more recently developed 3,000 Instant Words (Sakiey & Fry, 1979).

Others have identified words most often used among children's and adults' handwriting. Three recognized studies are Horn's 10,000 words (1926), Rinsland's list of 14,571 words (1945), and Greene's list of 5,507 words (1954). The majority of words selected for basal spelling programs usually come from a combination of these three studies.

A much smaller group of authorities have done frequency studies with speaking vocabulary. One of the well known is the International Kindergarten Union List of 2,596 words used in kindergarten and first graders' speech (1928). Other studies include Dale's 769 Easy Words (1931), Wepman and Hass' study of 2,621 words most commonly used among children between the ages of 5 and 7 (1969), and two studies conducted among adults (Howes, 1966; Jones & Wepman, 1966). One of the most recent studies of spoken vocabulary is one reported by Moe and Hopkins (1975) who identified 250 of the most often spoken words among children in grades K-2.

Observations About Word Frequency Studies

Several observations should be made concerning word

frequency studies. First, there appears to be relatively little difference in high frequency word lists between those compiled from children and those compiled from adults, particularly with the first 500 to 1,000 words. Second, there is relatively little difference whether the lists are compiled from printed materials, speech, or handwriting. In other words, the majority of studies report similar word lists, regardless of the type of vocabulary or the age of the population used in the study, particularly with the most frequently used 500 to 1,000 words.

A third observation is that most of the studies are too massive to be manageable in a school curriculum. Of the thirty-three word count studies reviewed by White (1979), twenty-three contained 1500 to 86,000 words, seven had fewer than 500 words and only three contained 600 to 1500 words. If 1,000 words of highest frequency can account for 90 percent of the language used or encountered, White's review would suggest that most of the word lists available for classroom instruction are either too short and of narrow scope (e.g. Dolch's 220 words for primary grades), or too long and too broad in scope to use for instruction.

It has been suggested that a basic high frequency word list need not contain several thousand words to be both

accurate and broad in scope (Horn, 1926; McCarthy, 1977). The evidence presented here is the rationale used to develop a word list that would be appropriate for all students to master (reading and writing), broad enough to span several years of difficulty, and short enough to be manageable.

Development of the RSVP

Source of Vocabulary

The Reading-Spelling Vocabulary Program (RSVP) was generated from a compilation of 14 previously researched high frequency word lists. Seven of these studies involved words in print (Dolch, 1936; Thorndike, 1921; Fry, 1957; Kucera & Francis, 1967; Durrell, 1956; Olson, 1965; Fullmer & Kolson, 1961); three involved studies of writing vocabulary (Horn, 1926; Rinsland, 1945; Greene, 1954); four studies involved children's and adults' speaking vocabulary (Wepman & Hass, 1969; Jones & Wepman, 1966; Dale, 1931; Howes, 1966). Table 1 identifies the 14 studies, number of words in each study, and the number of words selected for the development of the RSVP.

Table 1 About Here

Criteria For Word Selection

Four criteria were used in selecting words for the RSVP:

1. Words appearing in the largest number of the 14 word lists had highest priority.
2. Words appearing in lists representing all three types of vocabulary (printed material, speech, and handwriting) received priority over words appearing in two or only one type of vocabulary.
3. Within the parameters of the first two criteria, words selected should represent a broad range of difficulty. Fifty percent of the vocabulary should be considered primary level of difficulty, twenty-five percent should be considered intermediate level, and twenty-five percent should be considered middle and secondary level.
4. The total number of words selected should not exceed 800 to 1,000.

Selection and Distribution of Words

Using the four criteria, 923 words were selected by Stetson from the 14 word lists identified in Table 1. The words were randomly arranged on sheets and distributed to 15 teachers enrolled in a graduate reading course at the University of Houston. They were asked to rearrange the words using two guidelines.

1. Words were to be distributed into four groups of approximately 230 words each. Each group was to be in ascending order of difficulty with group 1 the easiest and group 4 the most difficult.

2. Within each of the four groups, words were to be arranged into approximately 15 lessons that would generally ascend in difficulty.

Their work produced a 900 word list divided into four levels of 15 lessons each, a total of 60 lessons (See Table 4). Twenty-three words from the original list were deleted for ease of organization.

Validating the RSVP

Once established, two research questions were generated in order to validate the RSVP. First, what is the range of difficulty for the RSVP? Second, are the lessons and levels generally in ascending order of difficulty? A field study was conducted by the writers to answer these questions.

Method

A sampling of 120 words was selected from the RSVP by randomly choosing two words from each of the 60 lessons. The 10 words selected from lessons 1-5 of level I were grouped together and called Test 1. The 10 words selected from lessons 6-10 of level I were grouped fo form test 2. This procedure was followed with all 120 words resulting in 12 tests, each containing 10 words selected from 5 lessons.

A suburban middle class school district in the Houston area agreed to participate in the validation study. Teachers in three schools referred students in grades one through

nine who, in the opinion of the teacher, were reading approximately on the grade level in which they were enrolled. Each of the 467 referred students was administered the reading subtest of the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT). Students whose grade score on the WRAT fell between .0 and .9 of the grade in which they were enrolled were eligible for the study. For example, a 5th grader had to achieve a grade score between 5.0 and 5.9 to be eligible.

The 266 students who met the criterion were given the 12 tests (120 words) constructed from the RSVP and asked to look at each word and pronounce orally as many as possible. A word was counted correct if pronounced correctly within 10 seconds. Grade scores on the WRAT, raw scores on the 12 RSVP tests, and an item difficulty computed on each of the RSVP tests were used to answer the two research questions.

Results of the Analysis

Table 2 displays the data used to determine the approximate range of difficulty of the RSVP. By comparing

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Table 2 About Here

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column c and d in Table 2, it appears clear that performance on the RSVP sample test is directly related to reading scores on the WRAT. First grade readers averaged 3.2 words on the RSVP test. At each grade level there is a corresponding increase in the number of words pronounced on the RSVP

test. According to Table 2, students have to read at the 9th grade level before approaching a perfect score on the RSVP tests. Further analysis among the eighth and ninth grade students reveals far more significant differences than the scores on the RSVP tests indicate. For example, none of the eighth graders achieved a perfect score of 120 on the RSVP tests while 22 of the ninth graders achieved 120 on the same tests. Therefore, the level of difficulty for the RSVP test is established as ranging from grade one to grade nine.

The second question concerned itself with whether or not the 60 lessons of the RSVP were arranged in ascending order of difficulty. Because the 120 words in the RSVP tests were randomly selected, it is acceptable to assume that the level of difficulty among the 12 RSVP tests would predict the level of difficulty among the 60 lessons which the tests represent. Table 3 displays the item difficulty for each of the 12 RSVP tests (column c) as well as the item difficulty for each of the four levels (column d).

Table 3 About Here

From an evaluation of the data in Table 3, several conclusions are drawn:

1. Generally, each test is more difficult than the preceeding one (column c). The two exceptions are test 4, which is slightly easier than test 3, and test 6, which is slightly easier than test 5.
2. Based on the first conclusion, it can be predicted that each group of five lessons in the 900 word RSVP, represented by the 12 tests, ascends in level of difficulty with the same two exceptions identified above.
3. When the 12 tests are regrouped so that the item difficulty for all three tests comprising an entire level are combined (column d), it is clear that each of the four levels of the RSVP increases in difficulty from Level I through Level IV.

To summarize the findings it can be concluded that the range of difficulty for the RSVP is from grade one to nine and that the lessons are arranged, generally, in ascending order of difficulty.

Conclusions

The Reading-Spelling Vocabulary Program is a list of 900 words which are representative samples of the most frequently used words in print, in speech, and in handwriting. Its level of difficulty ranges from grade one to

grade nine. While no attempt has been made to arrange each of the 900 words in strict order of difficulty, it can be stated that the lessons generally increase in difficulty and that each of the four levels is arranged in ascending order or difficulty. The estimated reading difficulty for each of the four levels is identified below:

Level of RSVP	Estimated Grade Range
I (lessons 1-15)	1.0 - 2.5
II (lessons 16-30)	2.5 - 3.2
III (lessons 31-45)	3.2 - 4.4
IV (lessons 46-60)	4.4 - 8.5

Perhaps the RSVP approaches what Horn (1926) and McCarthy (1977) were thinking about when they suggested that basic lists of high frequency words should be manageable, accurate, and broad in scope.

There are some other advantages in considering the RSVP for the classroom and clinic. It may be the only list of less than 1,000 words that spans nine grade levels. Perhaps we should consider that the formal teaching of core vocabulary should continue well beyond the primary grades as is the thought of many.

A second advantage of RSVP is that, according to White's review (1979), it joins Fry's 600 Instant Words (1957) and Sakiey and Fry's 3,000 Instant Words (1979) as the only lists with a criterion or screening test, an

important time saver in placing students at an appropriate level for instruction.

A third advantage is that the RSVP is the only high frequency word list with two equivalent forms of a screening test. The two forms (A and B) were correlated at .995 ($p = < .001$), can be used for pre- and post-test comparisions, and have grade equivalent norms (Stetson, 1981). No other high frequency word list has this advantage.

Research is continuing on the RSVP. Two large studies are currently underway to validate the RSVP for spelling. Pilot studies conducted among high school and college students indicated that a large majority of these students were unable to reach mastery level when asked to spell the same 120 words, particularly those in tests 10 through 12. If corroborated by the current studies, we may find a four to six year difference between reading and spelling proficiency.

In conclusion, the mastery of a basic core of words such as the RSVP may take considerably longer than we have realized in the past. Perhaps we have placed too much confidence in the finality of short word lists such as Dolch's 220, and abandoned core vocabulary training too soon in favor of the more popular "content" vocabulary. We may be making one of our greatest contributions in leading our students toward literacy when we insist they master the "core."

Table 4

The 900 words of the Reading-Spelling Vocabulary Program (RSVP) arranged into four levels and 60 lessons.

Level I - Reading Range of 1.0 to 2.5

Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4	Lesson 5
a	can	at	out	on
I	you	be	she	too
in	red	am	so	was
is	one	do	big	yes
me	are	no	but	will
it	for	run	did	say
go	two	all	eat	who
my	not	find	get	well
to	look	help	now	good
up	make	jump	our	that
we	come	said	ran	must
the	play	came	saw	with
see	down	four	new	black
he	blue	funny	here	where
and	away	little	three	yellow
Lesson 6	**Lesson 7**	**Lesson 8**	**Lesson 9**	**Lesson 10**
an	us	his	ride	tell
by	if	stop	soon	pull
as	off	how	they	fast
or	sit	give	went	call
of	it's	had	have	best
ate	buy	any	into	know
old	cut	her	this	them
put	hot	from	what	live
fly	ten	again	like	once
ask	going	every	white	sing
has	after	over	please	made
let	just	walk	want	gave
him	take	open	pretty	think
may	were	some	under	round
there	could	when	brown	thank
Lesson 11	**Lesson 12**	**Lesson 13**	**Lesson 14**	**Lesson 15**
cold	your	far	clean	day
both	work	six	pick	seven
use	before	own	show	stand
why	first	try	long	shall
does	don't	done	kind	eight
read	green	fall	only	small
been	found	hold	hurt	house
five	these	full	much	bring
many	right	grow	carry	laugh
goes	wash	keep	drink	today
upon	sleep	warm	start	hope
very	write	draw	never	often
wish	their	about	light	then
around	would	which	better	fine
always	because	those	myself	together

RSVP Level II - Reading Range of 2.5 to 3.2

Lesson 16	Lesson 17	Lesson 18	Lesson 19	Lesson 20
man	son	time	lost	back
got	few	boat	feel	lady
boy	ago	home	past	girl
men	sat	tree	hill	real
end	war	fish	mind	snow
bed	dog	kill	need	room
cry	air	mean	road	door
die	pay	fell	sent	more
way	hit	face	life	told
hat	cow	same	pass	hand
bad	set	wait	late	dark
eye	cat	wife	note	took
sun	egg	rest	fill	next
car	fat	name	miss	stay
arm	yet	side	last	book
Lesson 21	**Lesson 22**	**Lesson 23**	**Lesson 24**	**Lesson 25**
turn	near	wind	sort	night
talk	fire	shoe	most	mother
each	even	drop	such	people
head	knew	poor	cost	father
left	high	bank	ball	window
kept	felt	hour	flew	school
farm	town	part	wear	another
hard	land	week	half	picture
baby	than	hear	able	thought
love	king	bird	idea	nothing
gone	step	milk	might	husband
food	city	ship	woman	morning
move	care	wood	thing	herself
year	swim	glad	cause	brought
sick	sure	body	watch	something
Lesson 26	**Lesson 27**	**Lesson 28**	**Lesson 29**	**Lesson 30**
water	still	music	stick	month
horse	hair	table	whole	reach
marry	ready	river	guess	color
money	until	chair	paper	class
while	story	young	alone	dress
happy	world	wrong	sound	plant
catch	fight	close	floor	cover
friend	along	change	great	church
winter	learn	street	leave	finish
garden	sister	should	hundred	office
almost	enough	dinner	himself	bridge
happen	ground	summer	person	being
doctor	brother	wonder	matter	reason
outside	children	clothes	figure	country
anything	beautiful	teacher	different	already

RSVP Level III - Reading Range of 3.2 to 4.4

Lesson 31	Lesson 32	Lesson 33	Lesson 34	Lesson 35
dig	box	rich	dive	won
dry	met	sail	wake	hid
fit	bury	trip	place	sad
top	chop	blow	shut	bread
fix	save	else	trap	short
hop	push	hide	rain	since
hug	onto	woke	kiss	point
lay	dead	wild	nice	alive
oh	drew	shot	plow	crash
pop	easy	swam	none	treat
row	ever	pray	pour	steal
tip	grab	lean	quit	shine
bit	join	hunt	seem	chase
yell	lock	grew	born	dirty
burn	paid	blew	cook	spell
Lesson 36	**Lesson 37**	**Lesson 38**	**Lesson 39**	**Lesson 40**
crawl	awful	spill	twenty	front
dance	below	fifty	family	wrote
faint	touch	guide	strong	began
hurry	steep	float	master	quite
kick	slept	shout	letter	brave
okay	drove	smart	eleven	tired
knock	fifth	later	afraid	twelve
scare	guard	maybe	anyway	either
silly	sharp	plain	behind	o'clock
stuck	foggy	giant	eighty	arrest
sixty	threw	other	forget	broken
allow	slide	quiet	hungry	decide
count	loose	spring	inside	polite
dream	snowy	minute	lovely	really
eaten	asleep	across	mostly	golden
Lesson 41	**Lesson 42**	**Lesson 43**	**Lesson 44**	**Lesson 45**
break	broke	nobody	whether	bright
build	paint	operate	electric	famous
climb	smoke	pretend	everything	thousand
drive	throw	quietly	sometimes	horrible
stare	tight	anywhere	fifteen	musical
field	bought	everyone	though	scream
beside	wander	except	downstairs	seventeen
caught	course	through	American	understand
wicked	listen	worried	married	Indian
sleepy	paddle	yourself	scratch	animal
stupid	careful	downtown	surprised	terrible
launch	without	fourteen	special	probably
anybody	company	practice	thirsty	interesting
against	believe	scary	finally	eighteen
suppose	purple	swallow	gotten	disappointed

RSVP Level IV - Reading Range of 4.4 to 8.5

Lesson 46	Lesson 47	Lesson 49	Lesson 49	Lesson 50
serious	actually	emotion	security	cultivate
coma	between	medical	accident	completely
artistic	capture	represent	beyond	blossom
courage	earnest	separate	collar	athlete
educate	scheme	society	disgusted	responsible
healthy	monument	confidence	satisfied	jealous
library	impossible	climate	profession	immediate
region	college	activity	magazine	individual
rural	yesterday	argument	occasion	domestic
studious	similar	damage	dramatic	especially
vague	ascend	pleasant	formation	muscular
bored	direction	realistic	hospital	tremendous
canyon	condition	opinion	incident	unfortunate
grief	possibility	morality	successfully	accomplish
height	familiar	hesitate	shoulder	automobile
Lesson 51	**Lesson 52**	**Lesson 53**	**Lesson 54**	**Lesson 55**
develop	protection	reflection	eclipse	accustom
critical	obviously	meditate	foreign	ceremony
business	institution	knowledge	intellectual	career
attractive	emergency	equipment	orchestra	desolate
apparent	expression	experience	sensitivity	ordinarily
reluctant	favorable	government	visualize	intentionally
perplexed	straightened	impression	absolutely	frustration
interpret	solution	technique	ashamed	encourage
hunched	curious	undoubtedly	cemetery	sufficient
facility	frighten	decision	discussion	assignment
disturbed	breath	burglar	fatigue	considerably
situation	ambition	arrangement	influence	disagreement
struggle	continue	advantage	miserable	community
affection	carefully	dependent	quarrel	ancient
beneath	blizzard	connection	ultimately	indication
Lesson 56	**Lesson 57**	**Lesson 58**	**Lesson 59**	**Lesson 60**
enthused	symbolism	peculiar	persuade	opportunity
horrified	decoration	exceedingly	existence	exhausted
intrigue	character	persistent	previously	imagination
language	astounding	discouraged	distinguish	luxury
particular	pathetic	circumstance	admiration	silhouette
suspicious	modernistic	explanation	prominent	sympathetic
valiantly	illustration	agriculture	anticipate	bouquet
definitely	eventually	proposition	despondent	conscience
conclusion	temporarily	comfortable	anxious	desperate
artificial	associate	destruction	collection	discernible
counsel	determination	complicated	rejection	fashioned
evidently	crevice	depression	contemplate	hilarious
military	atmosphere	companion	admonish	mischevious
optimistic	ambulance	appearance	apprehension	hypnosis
fantastic	necessarily	appropriate	composition	disheveled

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Table 1

The 14 High Frequency Word Studies (Print, Handwriting, and Speech) Used to Compile the 900 Word Reading-Spelling Vocabulary Program (RSVP)

Source	Words In Source	Wds. Selected For RSVP
In Print		
Dolch (1936)	220	220
Thorndike (1921)	10,000	860
Fry (1957)	600	480
Kucera & Frances (1967)	50,406	896
Durrell (1956)	754	534
Olson (1965	92	90
Fullmer & Kolson (1961)	184	155
Handwriting		
Horn (1926)	10,000	870
Rinsland (1945)	14,571	860
Greene (1954)	5,507	822
Speaking		
Wepman & Hass (1969	2,621	668
Jones & Wepman (1966)	1,102	829
Dale (1931)	769	593
Howes (1966)	4,097	231

Table 2

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations

For All Subjects Taking the Reading Subtest

of the WRAT and the RSVP 120 Word Test

(a)	(b)	(c)		(d)	
Grade Level	N	Grade Scores on WRAT		Raw Scores on RSVP Test	
1	29	$\bar{X}$	1.5	$\bar{X}$	3.2
		S	.20	S	2.9
2	27	$\bar{X}$	2.4	$\bar{X}$	24.8
		S	.29	S	14.9
3	30	$\bar{X}$	3.5	$\bar{X}$	67.0
		S	.35	S	14.3
4	24	$\bar{X}$	4.4	$\bar{X}$	90.4
		S	.3	S	11.6
5	31	$\bar{X}$	5.4	$\bar{X}$	97.3
		S	.36	S	5.4
6	36	$\bar{X}$	6.5	$\bar{X}$	109.4
		S	.38	S	5.5
7	27	$\bar{X}$	7.6	$\bar{X}$	114.6
		S	.27	S	2.9
8	30	$\bar{X}$	8.3	$\bar{X}$	116.9
		S	.28	S	2.1
9	32	$\bar{X}$	9.0	$\bar{X}$	119.4
		S	1.5	S	1.3
All Grades	266	$\bar{X}$	5.1	$\bar{X}$	85.9
		S	2.6	S	39.5

Table 3

Mean Item Difficulty For Each

of the Twelve RSVP Tests

(a)	(b)		(c)	(d)
RSVP Test$_1$	Source of Wds. Level	Source of Wds. Lessons	Item Diff. Each Test	Item Diff. Each Level
1	I	1-5	89.27	Level I 85.1
2	I	6-10	84.19	
3	I	11-15	81.86	
4	II	16-20	82.04	Level II 79.97
5	II	21-25	78.25	
6	II	26-30	79.63	
7	III	31-35	73.97	Level III 71.76
8	III	36-40	71.98	
9	III	41-45	69.32	
10	IV	46-50	54.23	Level IV 46.9
11	IV	51-55	47.1	
12	IV	56-60	39.38	